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ABSTRACT

A practicum sought to improve student writing and student attitude towards writing through a performance-based assessment which featured peer and teacher conferencing, holistic grading, and publication of material written by students. The practicum involved seventh and eighth graders and five teachers who instituted all aspects of the writing process from prewriting to evaluation. The 12-week writing program encompassed all four types of writing, provided folders for all students, outlined procedures for peer and teacher conferencing, conducted summative evaluations among teachers, enacted a letter-writing project among students, arranged for the collection and sealing of student folders for teacher assessment in the next academic year, and conducted summative evaluation surveys at the conclusion of the program. Analysis of the survey and evaluation of teacher discussions revealed a substantial increase in student participation in writing as well as an improved attitude by the students about writing. Use of holistic grading procedures brought about a greater awareness by teachers of this type of evaluation and provided a greater spectrum of positive grades from the students participating. Overall teachers and students generated a more positive outlook about writing in general and of portfolio assessment in particular. (Two tables of data are included; four appendixes--the Teacher and Student Surveys on Writing, the Teacher Summative Evaluation of Program, and the Post Project Student Survey--are attached.) (Author/PRA)

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Using Portfolios for More Authentic Assessment of Writing Ability

by

Richard J. Marchesani

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A Practicum I Report presented to the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Docotor of Education

NOVA UNIVERSITY

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PRACTICUM APPROVAL SHEET

This practicum took place as described.

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This practicum report was submitted by Richard J. Marchesani under the direction of the adviser listed below. It was submitted to the Ed.D. Program in Child and Youth Studies and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova University.

Approved:

June 30, 1992
Date of Final Approval of Report

Wm. W. Anderson
William Anderson, Ph.D., Adviser

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ABSTRACT

Using Portfolios for More Authentic Assessment of Writing Ability. Marchesani, Richard J., 1992: Practicum Report, Nova University. Ed.D Program in Child and Youth Studies. Evaluation/Performance-based Assessment/Portfolio Assessment/English Education/Secondary Education

This practicum sought to improve student writing and student attitude towards writing through a performance-based assessment which featured peer and teacher conferencing, holistic grading and publication of material written by students. The practicum involved seventh and eighth graders and five teachers who instituted all aspects of the writing process from prewriting to evaluation.

The writer organized a twelve-week writing program which encompassed all four types of writing; provided folders for all students; outlined procedures for peer and teacher conferencing; conducted summative evaluations among teachers; enacted a letter-writing project among students; arranged for the collection and sealing of student folders for teacher assessment in the next academic year; and conducted summative evaluation surveys following at the conclusion of the program.

Analysis of the survey and evaluation of teacher discussions revealed a substantial increase in student participation in writing as well as an improved attitude by the students about writing. Use of holistic grading procedures brought about a greater awareness by teachers of this type of evaluation and provided a greater spectrum of positive grades from the students participating. Overall teachers and students generated a more positive outlook about writing in general and of portfolio assessment in particular.

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7/7/92 Richard J. Marchesani

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

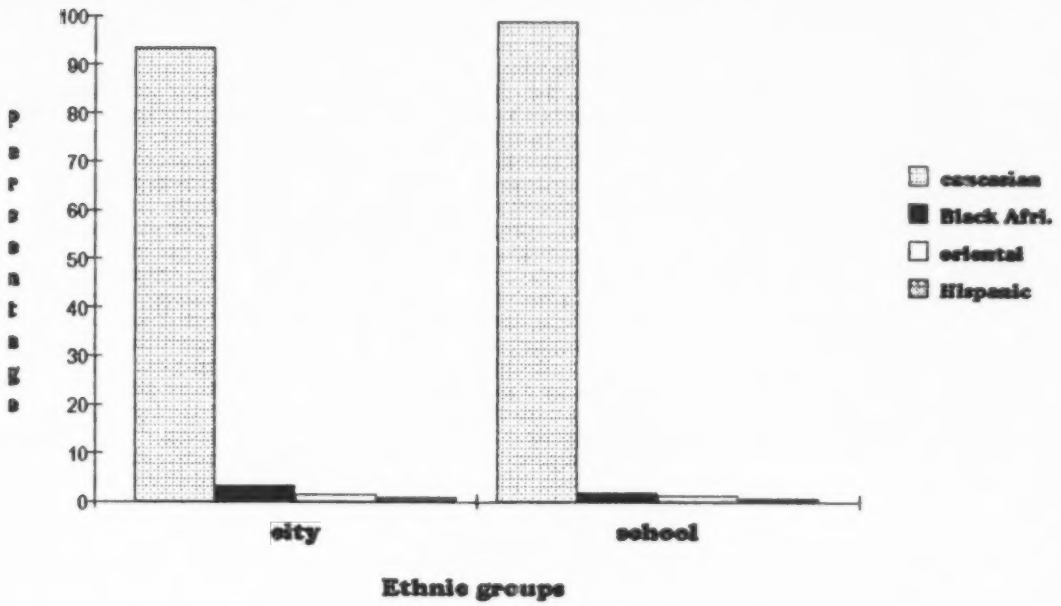
Description of Community

The setting for this practicum is a small urban community in the Northeast. Originally an industrial city which employed a great many immigrants, World War II brought about the establishment of a military air base (Rome Chamber of Commerce [RCC], 1979). Through the years, this air base became the primary source of employment and has had a tremendous economic impact upon the community. As local industry waned in the recessions following the Vietnam War, the air base grew from a military air command into a multi-complex of service and technological development laboratories (RCC, 1979). This change has caused a unique socioeconomic situation as upper income service jobs held by higher-educated people blended with the local immigrant descendants whose jobs are largely of an unskilled nature.

The city's 44,500 population has an ethnic configuration which is atypical of America's small cities in the Northeast (Hoffman et al, 1989). Buffalo, New York, for example, has a minority population of 32%. Table 1 reflects the ethnic breakdown of the city and the school which is the subject of this practicum. The minority percentage is barely at 4%. Although there is no information available to determine the correlation between minority status and economic levels in this city,

according to a senior aide to the Mayor's Council on Economic Growth, the average family salary of residents whose children use the public school system is $22,340 (Griffo, 1991).

Table 1 - Ethnic Configurations

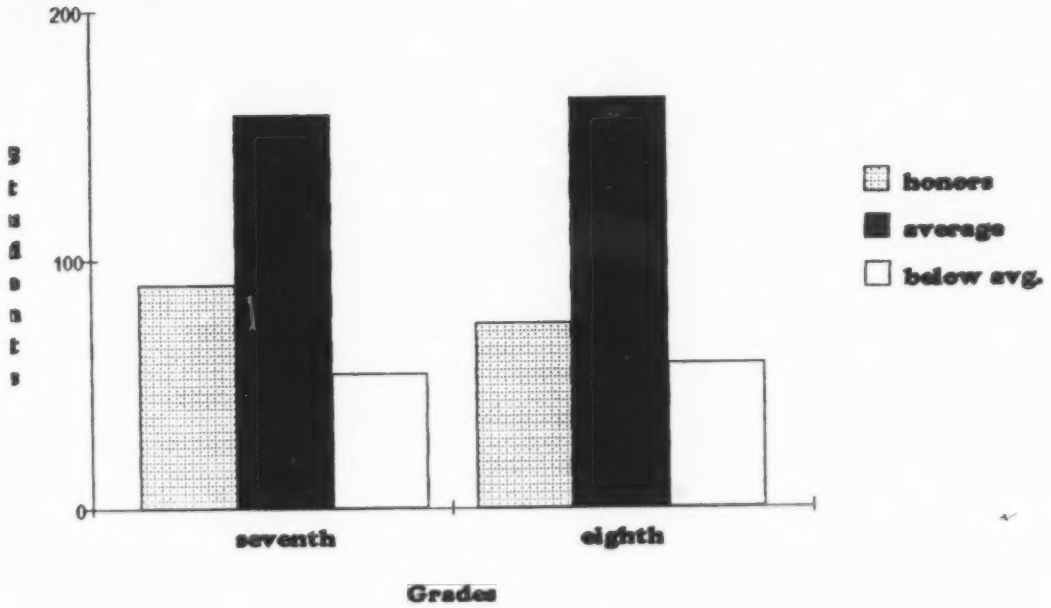


The school setting is a junior high (grades 7-9) with a total population of 956 students. This school uses an ability tracking system with three levels: honors, Regents (average), and basic. Based on records provided by the school's guidance department, Table 2 shows the distribution of ability groupings for grades seven and eight in the subject of English.

The school day is divided into eight 40 minute instructional periods and one 30 minute lunch period. The periods run

consecutively each day of the week. Student access to the computer lab is restricted to use as part of a class only. The school has no writing tutors or labs.

Table 1 - Ability Rankings



The Writer

The writer's entire teaching career of twenty-one years has been in the field of English at this school. The writer has been participated in a number of curriculum programs to improve instruction. An academic background in secondary English with a Masters Degree specific to curriculum development has provided the necessary credentials for this work. The teaching load for all

teachers at this school consists of three classes of average ability students, one class of below-average ability and one class of above-average ability students. The department has nine English teachers with one administrative teacher coordinator.

CHAPTER II

STUDY OF THE PROBLEM

Problem Description

The assessment of student writing in grades seven and eight is made on the basis of an evaluation of their written material as an end product. The determination of a student's progress in writing is made solely on the merits of the final written product as produced by the student on the final examination in June.

The writing abilities of incoming seventh and eighth grade students are ascertained by the English teacher through assessment of writing samples taken in September. Appendix A represents answers to a teacher survey on common instructional format for the teaching of writing. This survey revealed that there is no knowledge of student's previous writing capabilities or achievements prior to the initial assignments given early in the year.

The survey also revealed that none of the teachers used a continuous writing folder which contained all of the students' writing for the year. The impact of having little reinforcement on a student's writing is that a negative emphasis tends to dominate the evaluation procedure. Grades are given based on the end product whereas due to the lack of recurring feedback, the process of writing is ignored.

Simply stated, the problem is that writing assessment of

students in grades seven and eight is made entirely on the basis of a finished product and the results of the final examination in June.

For the past twelve weeks, writing assessment for students in grades seven and eight was made on the basis of review of their writing materials as contained in a permanent writing folder. This evaluation of their writing was made by their English teachers who responded to students' work through notes and oral communications. A single grade was given for the entire folder's contents.

Problem Documentation

Teacher and student surveys taken prior to the twelve-week project period, on the topic of writing in the classroom, revealed the need for a re-emphasis of the process over the product. Appendix B is a sample of a survey completed by 88 students which reflects their feelings about their own writing. When asked about their feelings when a writing assignment was announced, the overwhelming majority were in the negative. Interestingly, the students also responded that they did not really pay much attention to teacher comments - only to the final grade.

Clearly, the students were seeing the end product as being an evaluation of their own writing. The teacher survey correlates with the student's perspective as they generally agreed that there was little teacher reinforcement providing for revision or discussion of methods for improvement.

This school uses a six-week report period. The grade a

student receives in each subject is an accumulative average of grades on work accomplished during that period. Math teachers give students two week computer-printed analysis of their grades which pin-point exact percentage weights of quizzes, tests and homework. Consequently, students are conditioned to see the numerical grade as a bellwether of their achievement in that given subject. This conditioning has an effect upon their outlook of writing grades. The student tends to see the numerical grade given for a piece of writing as units of measurement for units of right or wrong responses.

The evaluation of writing is by nature a more complex process as it reflects commentary on the personal impressions of the writer. Numerical assessment can be objective in reference to mechanics of writing, but is clearly subjective in evaluation of writing style and technique. Therefore, the lack of recursive, revisionary writing, tends to leave the teacher completely in control of the writing as it is an evaluation of product - not process; an evaluation which is judgmental.

The final grade given the students in grades seven and eight is computed by averaging the year's accumulative report period grades with the grade attained on the final examination. The year's grades account for 70% of the final grade, while the final examination accounts for 30%. An item analysis of 74 average students taking the June 1990 English exam, revealed that non-writing questions received wrong answers at a ration of 8 to 1 to writing questions. Consequently, the poor performance on this

final examination produced an inaccurate picture of the writing assessment of these students.

Causative Analysis

The causes of this problem are complex in that they often involve ideologies on instructional methods used by individual teachers. The most immediate cause of the problem is the nature of the scheduling of classes. The 40 minute class period is quite constraining when a teacher is attempting to promote writing as a process. A student struggling with revision is very often interrupted by the end of the period and must either work on the paper at home or begin again the next day.

Associated with the time factor in class scheduling is the common English teacher complaint of not having the time to correct the papers. Giving one writing assignment per week could produce over 100 papers to be read and corrected. Given a reasonable, but albeit unsatisfactory, mean time of four minutes per paper, this is an additional six and a half hours of work for the teacher.

Lack of progressive writing folders is a major drawback to teachers in the new school year. According to the survey, teachers feel that it takes two or three writing assignments to accurately assess the writing ability and/or problems of a student. A folder containing a number of written assignments from the previous year would give teachers important input to help establish instructional methods for the year in writing.

The emphasis on numerical grades and the necessity to provide a grade for each student every six weeks, have great

impact on a teacher's priorities. Students are conditioned to receive a grade which pressures the teacher to numerically grade a student's writing. As the very nature of a process writing program is progressive and recursive, teachers often seek alternative methods of deriving at grades for students through more easily graded, objective testing procedures such as multiple choice and short essay questions.

This district had recently put into effect a writing-based English curriculum for grades seven and eight. The lack of formative or summative evaluation procedures in the curriculum model created a void of feedback as to the effectiveness of the writing program. Also, traditionally-minded teachers were reluctant to change their teaching styles from grammar to writing based, especially because the grammar based curriculum generated numerous and more easily computed numerical grades for their students.

Relationship of the Problem to the Literature

Process writing is often called a paradigm shift. Maxine Hairston first pinned the term to process writing in her article "The Winds of Change" (1982), and is considered an eminent spokesperson for vanguard thinking on the teaching of composition. She feels that the shift from product to process actually began with Noam Chomsky's book Syntactic Structures (1957) with its theory of transformational grammar, but points to Mina Shaughnessy's work at the City College of New York in 1970 as being the thrust which put process writing into the forefront

(Hairston, 1982).

Shaughnessy studied more than 4000 essays written by incoming community college students whose writing was considered unacceptable by traditional standards. She concluded that these students were not slow or non-verbal, but simply beginners in the act of learning how to write. By marking their papers, they were ignoring the simple question of why these mistakes were made (Shaughnessy, 1977). Shaughnessy says: "We must examine the intangible process, rather than the easy thing, evaluate the tangible product." (1977, p.5).

The literature is abundant in support of the theme that product centered evaluation of student's writing fails to address writing improvement but merely gives a numerical measurement to what is - that is - one piece of isolated writing. It assumes that this one piece is a representation of the entire spectrum of the student's writing ability.

In a study of leadership models, Kunhert and Lewis (1987) cite the differences in two types of leaders, the transformational and transactional. Whereas the transformational leader is heavily charismatic, the transactional leader involves him/herself in exchange of ideas, solutions and outcomes with subordinates (1987). Looking at leadership in this sense, we find that the shift from unidirectional leaders who charismatically attack the problem, to the transactional leader who seeks solutions through multi-strategies and organizational interaction with peers and subordinates, is mirrored in the writing paradigm shift.

Businesses and organizations are turning to strategic planning which focuses on the process of planning as opposed to the final blueprint of a plan (McCune, 1986). The emphasis is on the process, the methodology, the organization of ideas and constructs.

Miller and Crocker in their 1990 study of validation methods for direct assessment, found that standardized testing has a high reliability quotient and a sound test validity. Studies such as these strengthen the position of proponents for standardized testing who insist that easily measured tests give a quick and accurate measure of students' progress.

Grading the product is direct, easy and manageable. It serves the organization of numerical accountability, but it does not serve the needs of the student vis a vis writing improvement.

Since implementation of this practicum began in January 1992, the February English Journal published an article written by Charlotte W. O'Brien who was responsible for directing the large-scale assessment of 54,000 eighth graders in Missouri using the writing process format. This incredible task was accomplished with the results that reflected a curve of 64 percent of the students scoring on the upper end of the scale. This assessment was meticulously designed to allow for a wide-range of scoring criteria which would accurately measure a student's writing progress. The conclusions support the process writing approach for the improvement of student achievement in writing.

CHAPTER III

ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES AND EVALUATION INSTRUMENTS

The following goals and outcomes were projected for this practicum. The general goal was to establish a structure within which student's writing would be evaluated along the guidelines provided by the writing process rather than as an end product, and thereby improve writing ability as well as the students' attitudes about writing. By emphasizing a program of continuous writing throughout the year, the focus of assessment would be directed more on a progression of the writing achievements as opposed to the single copy work.

Change Expected

At the end of the implementation of this practicum, an increase of writing will be noticed as the one hundred and ninety-five students involved in the program will be required to submit a minimum of six written assignments in the 12 week implementation period. Additionally, evaluation of their writing will be done holistically to provide a more accurate assessment of their writing progress. Students' writing shall remain a permanent record of their performance in English class for the three years that they attend the school.

Student Objectives

Each student will begin by writing one work from a selection of four types of writing: persuasive, descriptive, expository or

narrative. The classroom teacher has the option of choosing the type and time of the work or allowing the students to choose. Each work will have a two week limit from beginning to final revision, during which time, the student must complete the first copy of the work with a minimum length of five paragraphs, or 150 words or a page and a half covered one side.

Following the writing of the original work, each student must have at least one conference with their English teacher or another teacher designee about their work. This will be verified by date and signature of the teacher. During the conference, discussion of style and editing will take place.

The students will then have their work read by a peer who is either a member of the class or a friend. This also must be verified by date and signature. This peer conference will focus on style and improvement or addition of ideas or content.

The final or revised copy must be completed before the two week time period and included in the student's portfolio with the date of final writing. This procedure will follow for each of the eight required works.

At one time during the program, students will be asked to write a letter to another student either in the school or in a neighboring school so as to establish both audience and sense of ownership for the student's writing. Teachers will verify that these letters should be placed in the student's folder as well as any answers the student receives from the corresponding student.

In the closing weeks of the program, students will be

encouraged, but not required, to contribute a piece of their writing for publication in the school's literary magazine. This may take the form of a work already in progress, a newly created work or any writing in either prose or poetry. This will be noted in their folders.

Students will be instructed to include all four types of writing in the folders in order to receive full credit for the writing portfolio. A student will be aware of his or her responsibilities on this. A failing grade will be necessary if this minimum requirement is not met. Students will also be encouraged to add other writing assignments such as answers to literature questions, literature essays as well as individual observations and comments.

Teacher Objectives

The teachers involved in this program, if not completely in agreement with the writing process philosophy, are committed to the twelve-week period of the practicum implementation and have agreed to abide by the objectives. In that light, students will not be given one grade for each single work, but rather an overall grade for the entire writing program for a specific marking period or at the conclusion of the twelve-week implementation period. Accordingly, each type of writing will not be individually graded by the teacher with a specific mark such as "A' or "B" or "95" or "85".

The program will begin with a meeting of all teachers involved to discuss objectives, guidelines and possible problems.

During this session a quick overview of the writing process will be discussed and ideas will be exchanged. Each teacher will be expected to comply with the basic objectives which are: 1)each of their students from the classes involved in the program will be given at least one assignment from each of the four writing categories; 2) each student will conference with the teacher on one of the writings from each category; 3) each student will be allowed to conference with a peer either in or out of class on each of the writing assignments; 4) each student will be allowed one revision copy; 5) all work completed by the students, which will include their first drafts, comments and revision copies, will be included in the individual portfolios; 6) there will be a final grade given for the student's overall work compiled in the portfolio and not for each individual work.

The scheduling of the writing assignments will be left to the discretion of each teacher with the only stipulation being that all eight be completed by the end of the twelve-week period.

The teachers understand that they will be expected to complete a six and twelve week summative evaluation sheet with the final evaluation containing a critique of the entire program.

During the implementation period, weekly meetings with the individual teachers will be made by the writer to assess the progress of the program. Teachers unfamiliar with the steps of the writing process agreed to allow the writer to assist where possible with the conferencing.

Teachers initialed the folders as to the inclusion of

letters written to fellow students and/or submissions to the school's literary magazine.

Standard of Perfo_mance

As the writing process is emphasized for these students, attention to revision will be greater and bring the student to a more active participation in his or her writing. This is essential in the transition from viewing stduents' writing as a process rather than a product.

With the minimum number of types of writing (one from each category - i.e. persuasive, expository, narrative, descriptive) required by each student, the teacher is provided with a wider spectrum of student writing abilities. A student may write with greater fluency in the narrative form but cannot expound in descriptive writing. With both formats juxtaposed the teacher may discover stylistic problems or at least give the student an opportunity to discover the presence of style in his or her writing.

Assessment Instrument

Midway through the implementation period, formative evaluation was given to the teachers participating. The teachers were asked about the progress as well as problems that had arisen. Part of this evaluation was the request for the number of specific topics which had been assigned, as well as a written assessment of how the class as a whole was performing in the writing program.

At the completion of the twelve-week period, the students involved in the program were asked to write a one or two paragraph

essay on their feelings about writing.

An integral part of the process writing program is the student's self-analysis of his or her own writing. Attention to the revision process of writing helps to advance this self-analysis. Through teacher conferencing and peer response techniques, a student may begin to deal with the "how" of his or her own writing.

Response is essential to improved writing as so much research has revealed. The student can sense an element of self-importance as discussion of a peer's writing requires opinions and thought.

Accordingly, an expected outcome of this practicum project was an increased emphasis on the progression of a student's writing by the classroom English teacher. With an increased attention upon revision, a natural outcome would be for a student's writing to be assessed over a longer period of time with consideration to the revisionary work completed. Therefore, a report card grade for the student will reflect evaluation of the whole rather than a simple accumulation of grades for a single copy composition.

Increased use of writing folders to contain specific writing samples by students, will provide the teacher with a more complete overview of the student's progress in writing. Maintaining this folder throughout the year and making it a part of the student's permanent record to follow him/her into the he next grade, will also provide the next teacher of writing a background upon which

to establish instructional direction.

Conclusion

The expected outcomes of objectives of this practicum implementation were centered around an emphasis of process over product through the use of portfolio assessment. The natural progression from this objective is that students will be given the opportunity to reassess their own feelings and judgements about writing which will hopefully be more positive from that which they have indicated in the survey.

CHAPTER IV

SOLUTION STRATEGY

The problem was that in grades seven and eight at this school, assessment of students' writing improvement was made on the basis of a product rather than on the process of writing itself. Evaluation which is isolated to the product and which does not consider the methodology used by the student to reach the product, undermines assessment standards. A teacher must look at the path of a student's writing behaviors in order to discover the best ways to motivate that student in written expression.

Discussion of Possible Solutions

Heterogeneous grouping with collaborative learning as an instructional strategy is certainly a solution strategy for writing improvement. Nancie Atwell condemns tracking by ability levels especially at the junior high or middle school level (1967). She argues that tracking forces competitiveness among students and discriminates against the lower ability students.

Research completed by DiPardo and Freedman find that peer response has a direct effect upon a student's attitude about his or her writing (1989). The literature falls overwhelmingly on the side of peer response, collaborative learning and portfolio assessment for the improvement of students' writing.

And yet as the survey in Appendix B indicates, students do not seem to be overly enthusiastic about editing or revision.

Additionally, the students surveyed generally dislike writing in any format and do not seem to be concerned about process or product. The grade, however, is important. Obviously due to years of product emphasis in evaluation, most students are conditioned to look for the final evaluative grade which gives a weighted judgement as to the work they have done. Students in this survey also felt that their time spent should be rewarded.

The problems with generating a collaborative learning atmosphere can be seen in both the students' and teachers' responses in the surveys of Appendix A and Appendix B. Teachers feel that they lose control of their classroom and that students use peer response groups as social gatherings.

Students want the teacher approval of their writing. The survey of the students involved in this practicum verifies what DiPardo and Freedman found in their study of response groups in the writing classroom. Their conclusions found that students felt that they benefited from peer interaction on their writing, and they ultimately put more weight into what the teacher felt about their writing than what their peers felt (1988).

Publishing is another solution strategy which has a great following among most English practitioners and researchers. Donald Graves believes that publishing is the end of the process which includes editing and revision. He contends that the writing folder itself is a form of publishing as students return to the folder to see where they have come with their writing (1987). Nancie Atwell cites the Boothbay Elementary student's many methods

of published their writing (1988). She believes that to young writers, publishing gives them a real sense of audience and that this ia crucial to making them better writers.

To realign student's perspective toward process writing, it is necessary for the emphasis to be placed on their writing as worthy to note and valuable beyond its use as a tool to get a good grade. Maintaining a writing folder that stresses continuous revision and improvement may be the first step in that realignment. If a student is being told that their writing is worth more than just a grade and that it has an authentic audience, (i.e. other students, teacher, parents), it is possible that an attitude shift could take place.

Solution Description

Each student was required to place two samples of each type of writing (persuasive, expository, narrative and descriptive) in their writing folder. The students chose the single best revision copy from each of the categories.

Teachers evaluated the folders' contents holistically and provided a numerical grade based on the entire writing collection. The teachers involved in the project agreed to grade these papers in this manner during the term of the practicum implementation.

Comments on students' papers were in the form of discursive responses by the teacher through the use of notes, phrases and some proofreading marks. Teachers also responded with conferencing and notes without corrections. Students were allowed to choose an option for grading such as numerical, letter or pass/fail.

To engender a stronger sense of audience in writing, publication of students' works was emphasized throughout the implementation period of this practicum. In the student survey (Appendix B) a common feeling about writing is that it seems to lack purpose. One student questioned why he should learn to write anything beyond a business letter as he doesn't plan on being a teacher or writer? Students who feel this way are lacking a sense of purpose in their writing and need to find a tangible expression of their efforts. Publication is certainly an answer.

Accordingly, students participated in a letter writing program between classes and grades. Each student wrote one letter to another student in a respective class or grade on topics of their choosing. These remained ungraded and uncorrected.

Midway through the program, teachers completed a formative evaluation form which was seeking their views on the program. As a result of this evaluation, changes were necessitated for the second six-week period. The same evaluation from was administered at the program's conclusion. See Appendix C.

In the final stage of the implementation period, each student was encouraged to submit his/her best piece of writing to be included in a literary magazine which will be published at year's end for grades seven and eight. Copies of the magazine will be given to all participating students as well as shelved in the school library.

The students' writing folders were kept throughout the year and will be passed to the next year's English teacher of record

for each student. The process of maintaining this folder becomes a method for both teacher and student to emphasize writing improvement by giving substance to the students' efforts. The writing which remains in the folder is a sample of the process and procedure which the students followed to produce the final works. It is far more substantial than a grade given at year's end for work completed on a final examination.

Most importantly, in the following year, the student will be able to see his or her own transformation as a writer. Additionally, the fact that teachers care enough about their writing to keep the folders and transfer them, sends positive messages to the student about the value of their learning.

Implementation Calendar

The stages of implementation covered a 12 week period which took in two grading periods for the students involved. During this time, the students were scheduled to provide no less than eight samples of writing and would have participated in the publishing program.

Folders for the program were supplied by the principal's office. Permission to run the program was obtained from the school principal. This final report will be given to the principal and participating teachers. All six English teachers involved agreed with the time schedule and requirements of the program.

Week One

Teachers met to finalize procedure and ground rules. Folders were

disseminated to the students in grades seven and eight. Each student was asked to include one sample of writing which they had written since the beginning of the school year.

Week Two

Students included one sample of writing from one of the four types of expression. This first piece of writing was generated through the complete writing process of brainstorming to final copy. All work was included in the folder. At this point most students in the classes of four of the six English teachers were on task and schedule. One teacher had not begun the project while the other had floundered due to a major discipline problem. For this teacher, the writer's encouragement and physical presence during three of the English classes helped immensely in solving part of her problem. The sixth teacher had still not begun the project by week's end.

Week Three/Four/Five

During these weeks students were to have completed one assignment in each of the respective types of writing. Also during this time, one sample of a literary essay was to be included. This was accomplished with varying degrees of success. None of the six teachers managed to get all four assignments but all six did get the literary essay sample. Teacher and peer conferencing also began during these weeks with great success and failure. The lagging teacher refused to allow peer conferencing. The teacher who had previously experienced discipline problems, found the conferencing to be disconcerting but made the attempt. The other four teachers

(including the writer) found this to be the most trying part of the project.

Week Six

Teachers completed the formative evaluation survey. The report of the results are found in Appendix D. By this time, the lagging teacher had all but dropped from the project and responded with her evaluation form in a single curt sentence. As a result of the evaluation survey, a reduction in the number of papers was decided upon as well as a decision to hold a critique among the participating teachers at the close of the twelve-week period.

Week Seven

Letter writing campaign was begun. Students were to write letters to either another student in the seventh or eighth grade, or to a person or business in the community requesting information. Most students chose to write to other students, but there were a few who wrote to local businesspersons, the mayor and one church representative.

Week Eight/Nine

At the beginning of the eighth week, students began working on their contributions to the literary magazine. By the conclusion of the ninth week, submissions were sparse but coming in steadily. Students were given the option to write a fresh piece or choose one from their folders. Most chose the latter, and a few students wrote poetry.

Weeks Ten/Eleven

Students were required to include two more samples of writing of

their choice for inclusion in the folder. All prewriting materials were included.

Weeks Twelve

Students completed an evaluation survey of the writing which is included in their folders. Teachers completed final evaluation form.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the assessment of writing ability for seventh and eighth grades students, evaluation was made on the end-product rather than on the process of writing. The solution strategy utilized for this practicum was to present writing to the students in a format which emphasized this process through a portfolio assessment technique. Students accumulated their writing over a twelve-week period in their writing folders and were given a grade for the overall performance, rather than on each single-copy piece of writing.

Expected Outcomes

Quantitative Increase. One of the primary expected outcomes of the implementation was to increase overall student output in writing. The average writing folder at the conclusion of the 12-week implementation period contained 3.3 finished writing pieces with revision and prewriting sheets accompanied. Many of the folders also contained homework assignments, essays in literature and a few with personal notes. Additionally,a number of students participated in the letter writing segment as well as contributing to the literary magazine. The teachers involved in the project agreed that the revision copies and prewriting techniques considerably increased the quantity of work from each student as compared with single-copy assignments (See Appendix C).

Although it was expected to have each student complete four assignments, 3.3 was actually quite remarkable when consideration is made for the unexpected snow days, one teacher dropping from the project and a host of discipline problems.

Holistic Grading. The use of peer and teacher conferencing techniques enabled the student to reflect upon his/her writing as a process. More importantly, however, was that the teacher was able to evaluate a larger number of papers without the tedium of reading every single paper for each student.

The peer conferencing was both effective and problematic as it provided editing and revision without teacher intervention but also created a discipline problem which proved to be the most crucial barrier to the project. The discipline problem caused one teacher to drop out of the project and another to sharply curtail student conferencing.

The concept of holistic grading is to generate the revision process and also provide a less judgmental approach to students' writing. Discussion of the teachers involved at the project's conclusion indicated that there remains some confusion about the approach to and understanding of holistic grading. A more thorough explanation and possibly more examples of this type of grading may have proved helpful prior to implementation.

Permanent Records. An outcome of this project which would provide next year's English teachers with some background of their students' writing abilities, was the permanent writing folder. The folders have been collected and are now in file cabinets but

are not closed. The teachers will continue to insert writing from their students as well as a final writing assignment which will be identified as such. It is hoped that this final written piece will reflect some improvement from earlier writings and therefore give next year's teachers a better perspective of their students' writing history.

Publication. It was hoped that all of the students would contribute to the letter writing and literary magazine. Neither of these assignments were mandatory as the teachers felt it would detract from the individual's student's purpose. Accordingly, approximately 43% of the students contributed letters and writing samples for the magazine. Interestingly, almost 89% of the contributions were from girls. Also, a majority of the contributors were merit and honor roll achievers in other subjects.

Discussions

The Students.

Clearly, the overall goal of emphasizing the process over the product in order to bring about an improve in both writing and student attitude about writing, was satisfactorily realized. The survey (Appendix D) given to seventy-five students at the completion of the project as compared to the survey given at the beginning of the project (Appendix B) shows some noticeable changes in opinions about writing.

There was an increase in the number of students who said that they read and/or listened to the teacher's comments more

frequently. The most telling of the post-project remarks was that they felt more eager to do writing assignments when they were allowed to conference with their peers. The students also overwhelmingly approved of the single grade for the entire folder, but expressed doubt as to the equality of the grades based on quantitative terms. In some written comments, the students felt that some of their peers were "getting away with murder" because they didn't have as much writing as the others. Unhappily many of the students still referred to writing in general as being a boring procedure in which they wouldn't engage unless required.

The entire project provided an emphasis for the students on writing in general. There was agreement by both teachers and students of a greater awareness that writing was considered to be more important than it was prior to the project. Possibly the concerted approach by all of the teachers involved added to that sense of importance, but the professional opinion among the teachers was that stressing revision and interaction with peers helped underscore the process.

As the summative evaluation indicates (Appendix D), the students have a more positive attitude about their writing and felt more comfortable with the entire process.

The Teachers.

The teachers were more vocal in their survey comments following the project. The general consensus among the five teachers who completed the project was that the chief area of concern is the discipline problem generated by the peer

conferencing technique. This concern appears to be the pivot upon which writing-process approach teaching in this school will turn. Three of the four teachers, found this particular point exclusively condemning of the writing process approach. Much discussion was enjoined concerning the feasibility of a writing lab in which a single teacher could conference with a student uninterrupted.

Additionally, the total volume of writing from the students proved to be a point of concern. The teachers were amazededt how easily it was to get the students to write on varied topics when the lesson was presented as a total writing program. Still a main concern was how to stop the class discussion and peer interaction in order to make a point on usage. The teachers were split on their beliefs of what procedure a teacher should take to teach usage. Two teachers felt that a regular lecture-centered lesson on specific aspects of usage such as possessives or subject-verb agreement was necessary prior to the assignment of writing topics. Two others, including the writer, felt that a more directed approach toward the student's writing itself might be more effective.

Finally, all of the teachers agreed that the letter writing and literary magazine approach was exceptionally good for getting students to take an interest and understand audience in their writing. Again, however, the question of time and circumstance make such endeavors difficult for the already pressed English teacher.

As indicated in the teacher survey (Appendix C), the teachers felt that the students achieved a higher level of productivity and quality in their writing when compared with the writing done during the first semester in a traditional grading program.

Recommendations

The use of portfolio assessment to improve student writing is receiving more attention from the education community as a focus is made on learning styles. The implementation of this practicum helped to stimulate discussion on performance-based evaluation in this school. Although the outcomes fell short of expectations in terms of actual student achievement, the teachers involved felt that the project was worthwhile and effective.

To implement such a program in the future some changes should be made to deter problems and provide more efficient administration. The problem of discipline must be addressed from the start. It would be helpful for teachers to pool their experiences in dealing with group situations and exchange strategies on how to generate peer interactions without the social chaos. A list of classroom rules or guidelines which establish a contractual atmosphere among students and between students and teacher, might help to prevent problems. Also, a student should know in advance exactly what is expected of him during the course of a peer conference - these points should be written on a checklist for each student.

Quantitative expectations should be left to the individual teachers. Some teachers are not comfortable with a great deal of topic assignments and would prefer a different approach to topic searches. Therefore, the quantity and type of written assignments must be left to the discretion of the classroom teacher.

Finally, a more direct approach to ascertain student attitudes on writing might be sought. Surveys are good, but some suggestions were made as to the use of video and/or audio tape to give students a more familiar and comfortable form of medium. Also, it might be helpful to have students survey themselves on writing and report their findings to the interested teacher.

This project did not involve teachers from other subject areas as the topic of content-area writing is another field of interest; however, contacting social studies and science teachers could provide the English teacher with a larger topic field and some pertinent insight into what students are doing in those areas.

Conclusion

As an experiment in cooperation, this practicum proved to be partially successful. As a model for the implementation of performance-based evaluation, it was quite successful. Some of the participating teachers were surprised at how much more involved their students became in some of the writing assignments. They also felt less didactic and arbitrary about the grading of the completed folder. Indeed the failures were a result of an absence of work not of poorly done work. The lower the grades,

the less contents found in the folders. Students whose grades were in the average to above-average level had completed the assignments with prewriting techniques. As a group, the teachers agreed that when taken as a whole, a student's work more closely represents his or her abilities.

Dissemination

This completed practicum report will be made available to the teachers involved in the project as well as to the professional shelves in our school library. Additionally, the report will accompany the English coordinator as part of a research portfolio for the committee which is establishing the performance-based evaluation for the next school year.

Finally, the report will become a database for teachers in the school who will be implementing a process writing approach for the next academic year. Since portfolio evaluation is being mandated by the District, English teachers will be meeting to formulate lesson plans based on performance-based assessment. This report will serve as a working model.

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APPENDIX A
TEACHER SURVEY ON WRITING

This survey was given to the six seventh and eighth grade teachers of the junior high school targeted for the practicum. The response totals are given in parenthesis following the statements.

The purpose of this survey is to explore your opinions and ideologies on the subject of the teaching of writing in your classroom. Therefore, you may write your own comments after any question which you wish to further qualify or remark upon.

Please answer each of the following questions as they are written or check one or more of the responses as they apply to your teaching situation.

Please feel free to comment or change a questions's responses in any way to fit your particular situation.

1. I assign approximately (____) [number] of written assignments over one page in length during one marking period.

(The average was 2 assignments per teacher)

2. I assign approximately (____) [number] of short essay questions in one marking period.

(Each teacher varied, but depending if stories or novels were done, the number was approximately 8.)

3. I assign approximately (____) [number] of essay questions on comparative literature during a marking period.

(Answers were similar to question 2 - the average being 8)

4. I assign approximately (____) [number] of fictional or narratives in one marking period.

(The average was one)

5. In my class students are allowed to revise

___ all written work (1 teacher)

___ written work on assignments longer than one page (4 teachers)

___ fictional works or research papers only (1 teacher)

6. In my class, students use which of the following as prewriting activities: (check as appropriate)

___ cubing (4 teachers)

___ looping (1 teacher)

___ freewriting (6 teachers)

___ brainstorming (6 teachers)

___ listing (4 teachers)

7. When correcting students' papers, I use standard proofreading marks:

___ all of the time (4 teachers)

___ some of the time (2 teachers)

___ none of the time (0 teachers)

8. I grade

___ every written assignment (6 teachers)

___ most of the written assignments (0 teachers)

___ all of the written assignments over one page (0 teachers)

9. My grades for written assignments are:

___ numerical (6 teachers)

___ letter (4 teachers)

___ verbal response with no grade (4 teachers)

10. I allow students to hand in revised work to improve grades

___ some of the time (5 teachers)

___ all of the time (1 teacher)

___ none of the time (0 teachers)

11. I grade

___ every assignment (4 teachers)

___ most assignments (2 teachers)

___ some assignments (0 teachers)

12. I teacher usage

___ as it applies to students' writing (6 teachers)

___ as a separation unit from writing itself (2 teachers)

___ not at all (0 teachers)

13. I teach grammar

___ separately from written assignments (2 teachers)

___ as an individual discipline (4 teachers)

___ hardly at all (2 teachers)

14. In my teaching calendar, writing makes up approximately

___ 25% (0 teachers)

___ 25 to 50% (2 teachers)

___ more than 50% (2 teachers)

___ difficult to ascertain (1 teacher)

15. I see writing as being

___ a separate discipline in the curriculum (2 teachers)

___ integrated throughout the curriculum (4 teachers)

___ useful to the students as a tool to respond to the curriculum (6 teachers)

16. I feel that to assess student's need in writing, the following number of writing samples are needed:

___ one (0 teachers)

___ two or three (6 teachers)

___ four or more (0 teachers)

17. I allow students to divide into groups to discuss their writing.

___ sometimes (2 teachers)

___ hardly at all (4 teachers)

___ for all writing assignments (0 teachers)

18. When students are in groups, the greatest problem I encounter is

___ non-productivity (4 teachers)

___ class control (4 teachers)

19. I find peer response in writing as

___ productive for the students (2 teachers)

___ non-productive (4 teachers)

___ something I honestly haven't attempted to any degree (4 teachers)

APPENDIX B

STUDENT SURVEY ON WRITING

The following survey was given to a total of 88 seventh and eighth graders . The results are given in parenthesis following each statement and represent the mean response.

DIRECTIONS: PLEASE ANSWER ALL QUESTIONS ON THIS SHEET. IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO PUT YOUR NAME ON THIS PAPER.

PLEASE READ:
The purpose of this questionnaire is to help discover more about why you write, what you write, and how you write. Please answer as honestly as you can.

1. As well as you can remember, write the number of writing assignments which were more than one page long - for each of the following:

Social Studies: (Average number 3.5)

Science:(Average number 1.4)

Art and Music: (Average number .8)

2. As well as you can remember, write the number of compositions you wrote for your Language Arts or English class last year:

(Average number 7.1)

3. When you wrote compositions or stories for your Language Arts or English class, did you write a rough or first draft?

(circle one)

some of the time (29)all of the time (48)

none of the time (11)

4. When you writing assignments from your Language Arts teacher was returned, did you read the teacher's comments?

some of the time (8) all of the time (79) none of the time (1)

5. Which of the following grade groups would you say most of your writing assignments received last year?

(circle one)90s, 80s, 70s, 60s

(14) (62) (10) (2)

6. When your teacher tells you that you are about to do another writing assignment - describe your feelings. (Approximately 67% described their feelings as varied, 26% as neutral and 7% as eager).

7. Which of the following best describes your feelings about your writing assignments in Language Arts or English?

a. I do the best I can so I can get a good grade. (48)

b. I don't really like to write at all. (22)

c. It doesn't really matter to me one way or the other. (18)

8. When your teacher asks you to rewrite or revise your paper, do you change it or just copy it over more neatly?

change it	copy neatly	keep it the same
(23)	(51)	(14)

9. Do you think that revising your writing helps to improve your grade?

all of the time	sometimes	not really
(14)	(43)	(31)

10. Which of the following best describes your feelings when you have just been given a writing assignment.

a. I am very unhappy that I have to write. (39)

b. I am sort of unhappy that I have to write. (34)

c. I am excited about another chance to write. (5)

11. Which of the following best describes your feelings about writing in general:

a. I like to write because it is easy for me. (15)

b. I like to write even though I struggle with it. (12)

c. I don't like to write at all. (24)

d. I like to write sometimes but not others. (37)

12. The following statements talk about your feelings for writing. Please circle the response under each statement which best describes your feelings about that statement:

a. I look forward to doing writing assignments.

yes, always (5) never (21) it doesn't matter (62)

b. I like the type of writing assignments that involve illustrations (drawings) or cut-outs.

no, never (4) sometimes (21) yes (41) strong yes (22)

c. I like writing assignments that ask me to look things up in the library or other reference sources.

absolutely not (39) sometimes (24)

yes (15) strong yes (10)

d. I like writing assignments on real life topics.

absolutely not (12) sometimes (53)

yes (19) strong yes (4)

e. I like fictional writing (stories) assignments most.

absolutely not (10) maybe (34) yes (32)

strong yes (12)

f. I like all writing assignments

absolutely not (19) sometimes (59)

yes (4) strong yes (6)

g. I most like getting back writing papers that are not marked by the teacher at all, but just have a grade.

absolutely not (72) sometimes (13)

yes (3) strong yes (0)

h. I would rather not get a grade for my writing assignments at all.

absolutely not (86) sometimes (1)

yes (1) strong yes (0)

13. In this space please write in your own words, how you feel about writing in general. This includes ALL writing - both in and out of school.

(Responses varied from a few who displayed disgust to the extreme of those who "love" it. Generally, students expressed an acceptance attitude with many saying that they wanted to choose what and when to write.)

APPENDIX C

TEACHER SUMMATIVE EVALUATION OF PROGRAM

Directions: The following statements are offered as a stimulus for your opinions and judgements of the writing portfolio program in which we have engaged for the past twelve weeks.

1. The most positive aspect of the program was in your opinion...

(Responses varied but the overall trend of opinion was the evaluation procedures which teachers felt produced a more accurate assessment of the student's work)

2. The greatest gain was for the teacher alone, the student alone, both teacher and student to some degree.

(Five of the teachers felt that both student and teacher gained, while one teacher thought there was no gain)

3. The writing of the students most certainly was more (or less) prolific.

(Five teachers felt that the students most certainly were writing more and all agreed that the students were more positive about their attitudes on writing).

4. The quality of the writing can best be described.....

(Five teachers agreed fully that writing quality improved and added that they felt it had done so because of the revision process. Additionally all agreed that the grades were substantially better that grades given for writing during the first semester when portfolios were not used).

5. If you recommend that the program be continued a. in its present form, b. in a modified form or c. without any restrictions, or d. should be scrapped entirely, - briefly summarize your reasons.

(Only one teacher felt that performance-based evaluation of students' writing should be scrapped. All other five agreed that it was more effective than direct assessment.)

6. Please provide a subjective perspective on whether or not you think that the students' feelings or attitudes about writing have changed since the use of the folders and new assessment procedures.

(The summary response was that the students did indeed benefit from this type of evaluation. All commented on the value of having the writing folders for use the following academic year.Most importantly, five of the six teachers responded that performance-based assessment was a more positive step in the evaluation process)

APPENDIX D

POST PROJECT STUDENT SURVEY

The following survey was given to seventy-five seventh and eighth graders who participated in the projectectThe response averages are given in parenthesis following each question.

DIRECTIONS: Please read each question and answer as honestly as you can. Your name does not need to appear on this sheet.

1. Do you feel that over the past twelve weeks you have done more or less writing in English class than you have done previously.

more	less	no change
(75)	(0)	(0)

2. When your teacher announced that you were about to do a writing assignment, please indicate which of the following you felt:

a. ___ eager to begin (5)

b. ___ not really happy or unhappy (61)

c. ___ very unhappy (9)

3. What was the best part of doing the writing assignments?

(All 75 students responded - conferencing with peers)

4. Did you find peer conferencing

a. helpful	b. very helpful	c.not helpful	d. neutral
(56)	(7)	(8)	(4)

5. How were your feelings about the method of grading (one grade for the entire folder)

a. did not like it (12)

b. liked it (58)

c. didn't matter (5)

6. Do you think your English class became quieter or noisier in the past twelve weeks?

a. quieter (0)

b. noisier (75)

7. If you could, what would you change about the way writing is done in your classroom?

a. don't do it at all (6)

b. have more writing sessions (43)

c. write on more interesting topics (23)

d. (various other responses) (3)

8. In this last question, discuss your opinions and feelings and give any comments you wish on the subject of writing in general.

(Responses varied but there was a noticeable increase of interest in writing as a separate topic. Some again said that it was boring and others reflected a middle of the road attitude, but there was a sense of improvement in the overall attitude).